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Cuba

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SECRET

FROM FOREIGN OFFICE TO WASHINGTON

Cypher/OTP

PRISEC

No. 4678

October 29, 1959.

D. 10.50 p.m. October 29, 1959.

DEDIP

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Please pass the following to Mr. Herter personal from me.

Dear Chris,

I want to raise with you personally a matter which is causing my colleagues and me considerable anxiety. The Cuban Government are pressing us very strongly to allow them to exchange their Sea Fury aircraft for an equivalent number of Hunters.

2. There are the following reasons why we should do this. I set them out fully but not in any order of priority.

- (a) Castro has said that he will go behind the iron curtain to get jet fighters if he cannot get them through us. It is true that some people think it unlikely that he would in fact do that. That was also our opinion about Nasser in 1955, and look where that got us.
- (b) Having supplied Batista, it would be very difficult for us to refuse even replacements to Castro.
- (c) It would seem unfortunate to treat more harshly a left-wing government struggling, however misguidedly, to carry through an idealistic programme after we have been willing to do business with Batista. This might have a very important effect in other Latin American countries.
- (d) The Cubans maintain that the exchange would not mean any increase in offensive strength: Hunters, although more powerful, have a shorter range than Sea Furies and can be said to be more defensive, with the result that exchange would decrease rather than increase Cuba's offensive power.
- (e) Castro is prepared to give an assurance that the Hunters will never be sent over any foreign country, even if Cuba were herself attacked.

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(f) The Dominican Republic has a large Air Force, including a number of military jets.

(g) In any case the Hunters will not be ready for six or nine months after the transaction has been authorised.

3. I must also tell you quite frankly that there are difficulties about refusing this request in view of actions by the United States authorities. After advising us against making any sale of helicopters to the Cubans there was an American sale. After saying that there would be no relaxation of present restrictions without consultation with us, we were confronted by a firm United States decision committing you to sell unarmed aircraft. We did reach agreement about unarmed patrol boats which have mitigated that somewhat. Your people also announced publicly that they are opposed to the exchange. We are now put in the position that if we refuse to allow the exchange we shall be considered as having given in to United States pressure.

4. We do not wish to do anything to inflame the present state of United States/Cuban relations. We are anxious to play our part in controlling the supply of arms to the area. Nevertheless, I feel that I must authorise the exchange as soon as the present effervescence and violent feelings have died down. I think the arguments in favour of this particular transaction are strong enough for it to be considered as a special case. If this would cause difficulties with other countries whom you have been restraining you may consider that we should agree to a further relaxation of restrictions which would allow limited replacements.

5. This may obviously be a source of friction between us and I have put the arguments very frankly to you. It is distressing that everything cannot run smoothly all the time, and a small matter like this can cause more trouble than much wider matters of policy, where we are at harmony.

With warm regards,
SELWYN.

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